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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9426

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2795

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0617

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0493

RHMFIA/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0570

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BERDIMUHAMEDOV PROMISES RELEASE OF PRISONERS OF CONCERN

REF: 06 ASHGABAT 1097

Classified By: CHARGE RICHARD E. HOAGLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) During a September 24 debrief of UK Minister of Energy Malcolm Wick's 19-20 visit that focused primarily on oil and gas issues (septel), UK Ambassador Peter Butcher reported Wicks raised political development and human rights in meetings with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers/Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov. Butcher said although Berdimuhamedov said nothing new, he was less defensive on the subject than he had been a few months earlier. Moreover, the president said that "the people on your lists" would be among the 9,000 who will be pardoned during the annual Night of Omnipotence amnesty. (COMMENT: Wicks did not hand over a list of prisoners during this visit. We believe that Berdimuhamedov is referring to prisoners mentioned previously by various Western visitors. END COMMENT.)

¶2. (C) Post has asked several relatives of prisoners of concern, and only one has confirmed to us that a relative will be released in this year's amnesty. An Embassy FSN whose brother was imprisoned two years ago in connection with a Niyazov-era crackdown on corruption in the Water Management Ministry was told by unspecified government officials that the brother would be released on or about October 7. (NOTE: Despite the October 7 date given to the FSN, there is still some question about exactly when in October the Night of Omnipotence will take place. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) COMMENT: Last year, 10,000 people were pardoned in the amnesty, most of whom were common criminals whose families paid government officials \$2,000-\$40,000, depending on the severity of the crime (reftel). If Berdimuhamedov indeed releases real prisoners of concern in this year's amnesty, it will be a good sign of progress in human rights in Turkmenistan. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND